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ABSTRACT

In general, the lower-class student has been considered scholastically inferior to the child of middle-class origins. More specifically, such a child has frequently been explicitly or implicitly denied the benefits of a foreign language learning experience on the basis of his/her inability to cope with the difficulty level assumed to be inherent in such an experience. Although such stereotyping can be seen as the result of a complex of social, political, and psychological factors, it is possible that the lower-class child's difficulties with school are due to a different mode of cognitive functioning. Following the division established by Witkin in 1962 between field-independent and field-dependent learning styles, it is hypothesized that the lower-class child is characterized by an intellectual organizational tendency that is at odds with that of the school, and that this cognitive misfit can be at least partially remedied by an appropriate teaching orientation and the application of appropriate teaching methods. Several such methods are suggested, and a fairly extensive bibliography is appended. (Author)

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Social Class and Foreign Language Learning: Implications for Curriculum

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In general, we do not expect inner-city children to master a second language any more than we expect them to understand calculus or to go to Harvard or to become president of I.B.M. Why? Because, according to tradition, they cannot-- it is not part of their socio-economic territory, and trespassers are failed on sight. It happens every day, and foreign language teachers are no exception. The elitist image surrounding foreign languages in the United States is hard to overcome. Few suburban high schools lack an adequate foreign language program while few inner-city or rural schools have one, and even fewer teacher-training programs include any preparation in the teaching of lower-class or linguistic-ethnic minority students. Such a situation is no longer feasible or defensible. Dropping enrollments have caused foreign language study to be offered to a wider range of students while, at the same time, there has been an increasing awareness of the educational needs of America's poor but bilingual citizens. The problems are there, and foreign language teachers should be among those dealing with them, but few are, and few can, simply because they do not know how.

I was certainly no exception. My interest in the problems of disadvantaged[1] learners was initially pragmatic. In other words, I came to the subject by necessity as much as by choice. Suddenly, after nearly two years of teaching high school French, I realized that all the disadvantaged students did not live in the inner-city, that there was a large number of such students living in the predominantly lower-working-class neighborhood that surrounded my school, and that not all these disadvantaged (read: non-middle-class) students were black or brown or yellow. They were, however, in my foreign language program, and I had assumed that everyone "knew" that foreign language study was only for the "academically-talented" student.

I was wrong--on every count--and so, conforming to my image of what the dedicated and socially aware teacher of the seventies should be, I set out to "advantage" the disadvantaged and bring light into their world.

I didn't get very far. In the first place, although it seemed obvious that a literal forest of trees had been sacrificed to the cause, no one seemed to have been able to formulate in print a clear definition of what it actually meant to be disadvantaged, much less tell me what to do about it, and although there were numerous references to the disadvantaged learner in math programs and English and social studies programs, apparently James B. Conant's 1959 proclamation (Conant, 1959: 20) that only the top fifteen

to twenty per cent of the high school population should be allowed to study foreign languages or advanced mathematics was still viewed as valid in 1974. As one counselor told me, "You know those kids don't really have any business studying a foreign language when they can't even speak good English. We'll put them in remedial reading instead." Obviously, I was going to have to make my own inferences and draw my own conclusions.

As I found out, there are basically two general orientations to the problem of the disadvantaged learner: first, the theoretical one, which emphasizes environmental factors along with the bad faith of the American school in its dealings with the lower-socio-economic classes; and secondly, the practical approach to the teaching of the disadvantaged that emphasizes games, relevance and concrete learning, but which frequently turns out to be little more than a cataloging of what has worked for one teacher in one situation with one group of students. The range of variables involved in "advantaging the disadvantaged" is so immense that easy generalities explain little, and anecdotal material, once removed from its setting, is often irrelevant. There are no easy answers, and even after a great deal of research, I am still unable to formulate any definitive ones. My purpose in what follows is not to promote any dogma but to offer some suggestions, and what I would like to do is to first outline the physical, cultural and psychological parameters of the disadvantaged learner as I see them, and then to consider their implications for the foreign language curriculum.

The first issue is that of definition. Who or what are disadvantaged learners? Do they exist as individuals or is this term, along with its fellow-travelers--deficient, deprived and different--nothing more than a handy way of differentiating the lower-class or ethnic-linguistic minority student, who generally experiences some degree of failure within the school system, from his middle-class counterpart who generally succeeds?

Viewed historically, it should come as no surprise that low socio-economic status correlates positively with low school achievement. Educational stratification along class lines is as old as Plato and as new as the latest standardized test. As Joel Spring and others have documented, the nineteenth-century egalitarian rhetoric in the United States was closely associated with the nascent corporate state's growing need for a minimally educated but maximally controlled source of labor (Spring, 1972; see also Bowles, 1968 and Karier, 1972). Equality may have been the theory, but assimilation and social stratification were the realities, and by the early 1920's, the immigrant child, the Black, the Indian, the Mexican-American, and the poor White, had already become, paradoxically, the willing if unconscious accomplices of an educational system that offered with one hand and withdrew with the other. Education's theme song, as Martin Deutsch puts it, was a simple one: "We tried--they failed." (Clark, et al., 1972: 86).

Originally, in the 1960's, the concepts of cultural deprivation or disadvantage were nothing more than environmental variants on the old theme of genetic inferiority. Social scientists used these terms to designate the multiple psychological and social factors operant in the environment of lower-class or ethnic-linguistic minority children that differentiated

them from their middle-class counterparts. The choice of labels led quite naturally to connotations of inferiority, even if the original intent had been benign. Obviously, disadvantage can exist only in relation to advantage, and the advantage lay in the hands of those who were employing the terms. Thus, as manipulated by the educational establishment, cultural disadvantage and deprivation became a convenient-if-simplistic rationale for the co-existence of democratic goals and elitist practices in American schools.

Nevertheless the fact remains that children who are not the products of middle-class backgrounds differ in school from those who are. Because they tend to fail, they tend to disrupt the schools' status quo. And given the American commitment to "compulsory educational opportunity," they cannot get out; so they sit there, the subject of theoretical research, and the focus of seemingly insurmountable problems. From a pedagogical point of view the task should be fairly simple--find out where each child is, start there, and then bring him or her as far as possible--but in practice there are several obstacles. The primary one, as Nancy Modiano has pointed out, is determining where the children are (Modiano, 1969). We are dealing with diversity, not unity. A Mexican-American living in a traditional village certainly presents a different profile from that of an Appalachian child whose family is subsisting on black lung disability benefits. Likewise, the black child living on a few acres of clay in the South faces vastly different problems from those of a ghetto child in Detroit (Stone and DeNevi, 1971). Nevertheless, there are distinctive features that appear to cut across ethnic and environmental lines. Among these are below-average income, low social status and a clear perception of "groupness" as perceived by those within the group as well as by those on the outside. Further, the children of this subjectively salient group must all confront the realities of formal education, and it is here, in the interface between their home culture and that of the school, that the problem really begins.

For such children, the first few days of school will probably be the high point of their academic careers. From then on, the way out is generally down. Two major factors are involved: a lack of middle-class experience and intuition on the part of the child and low expectations for that child's success on the part of school personnel. Formal schooling represents a formidable barrier to lower-class and ethnic-linguistic minority children in that its values and assumptions are not necessarily consistent with those considered valid within the home environment. As Joshua Fishman (1966) has pointed out, we have monocultural schools within a polycultural society, and children whose heritage is at variance with that of the schools discover that, in this context, difference is disadvantage.

For example, several studies (Hewett, 1971; Frender and Lambert, 1972; Tucker and Lambert, 1969; Williams, 1970) have shown that speech styles serve as social identifiers and thus elicit stereotypes that quite often take on a life of their own. A teacher will consciously or subconsciously determine his or her students' social status by their speech; this categorization, especially when combined with distinctive physical features, sets

into motion a complex network of assumptions that influence the teacher's expectations of the students in question, which, in the form of self-fulfilling prophecy, will tend to influence the students' classroom performance.

Consider, for a moment, what might happen in the classroom of a Mrs. Smith or a Mr. Jones, typical teachers, middle-class either by birth or adoption (Wattenberg, et al., 1971), and products of their times. Mrs. Smith, who has been teaching for a good many years, never has believed in all that educationese. To her way of thinking, the three d's--deprived, disadvantaged and different--are nothing more than euphemisms for the fourth one--dumb. And no one could seriously expect her to train literate and cultured individuals when the parents of these individuals insist on undermining her best efforts with their semi-literate and cluttered existence. They can't help it, but then, neither can she.

Next there is Mr. Jones, a new teacher, who knows that being different can be an asset, and who is determined to give "those kids" every chance, to really believe in them, and maybe to write a book about the whole emotionally uplifting experience. But somehow he gets sidetracked. It couldn't be his fault that "those kids" aren't learning, so it must be theirs, and another crusader turns in his sword.[2] He may never even consider the fact that his continued reference to his students as "those kids" may have contributed to his disillusionment.

This distinction between "us" and "them" is crucial because it is both based on and reflected by physical and psychological reality. The middle-class child whose mother drives him to school is different from the inner-city child who gets to school, if he does, the best he can. They experience different lives, and these lives, in turn, leave their imprint on the children. The impact of borderline nutrition, minimal medical attention and poor housing cannot be ignored,[3] but even more important is the psychological damage done by attempts to judge all children by middle-class standards of value and worth. As a result, the middle-class student tends to believe in his ability to learn and in the efficacy of his control over the events in his life. Thus he perseveres in learning and perpetuates the beneficent cycle. The lower-child, on the other hand, learns to expect failure and to concede defeat early in his school career. He tends to believe that he has very little control over what happens to him in school and thus often either abdicates all responsibility or reacts with violence against that which he is powerless to change.

The crux of the problem, then, lies in the interaction that takes place between the lower-class or ethnic-linguistic minority child and the school. It has often been suggested that these children, for reasons of either nature or nurture, lack the intellectual ability and skills of middle-class children.[4] So far, however, the evidence points not to a lesser capacity for learning among the disadvantaged so much as it does toward a different and perhaps less academically efficient mode of cognitive functioning (Crano, Denny and Campbell, 1972; Schmidt and Crano, 1974).

A review of the literature suggests that in talking about disadvantaged versus advantaged learners, we may indeed be dealing with different cognitive styles or means of organizing and structuring experience. Frank Riessman (1962) tells us that the culturally deprived child is characterized by a learning style that is physical and visual rather than aural, problem-centered rather than abstract, and spatial rather than temporal. Basil Bernstein (1972) speaks of the restricted, context-bound speech code of the English working-class which contrasts with the elaborated context-free speech of the middle-class. Further, Irving Taylor (Riessman, 1962, p. 73) has pointed out that many of the characteristics of the deprived student are analogous to those of the creative individual, and other studies have indicated that the disadvantaged do tend to outscore the advantaged in some areas of creative thinking (Solomon, 1974).

In a study in 1966, Clementina Kuhlman (Bruner, 1966: pp. 26-28) classified children in two groups: those children who depended largely upon the ikonic or imagery form of reality representation to organize and learn and those children who were able to use symbolic conceptualization to accomplish similar tasks. According to Kuhlman, this latter group, the conceptualizers, experienced greater academic success than did the former, the imagers. Related to these findings are the results obtained by Greenfield, Reich and Oliver (1966) which point to a cognitive differential between city and rural children, as well as between children who have attended school and those who have not, the school-attending or city child tending toward a symbolic or language-centered cognitive style, and the rural or non-school-attending child tending toward a cognitive style based on imagery.

In a recent book dealing with Mexican-American children and the schools, Manuel Ramírez and Alfredo Castañeda (1974) have attempted to organize these clusters of characteristics by use of the well-documented psychological distinction that can be drawn between field-independent and field-dependent (or field-sensitive) individuals. In brief, field-sensitive individuals tend to view the perceptual field as a global whole and to experience difficulty when asked to abstract discrete elements from it. Thus, in learning situations, field-dependent people tend to rely upon memorization and deduction, focusing upon the whole rather than its parts. In other words, they see the forest but miss the trees. Field-independent individuals, on the other hand, experience parts of the field as distinct from the whole and have little difficulty in the abstraction and re-ordering of material. Their inclination is analytic, and they are usually able to provide their own processes for restructuring material in order to make it more easily learned. But of course, they may easily miss the forest for the trees.

From the personal and social point of view, field-sensitive subjects tend to be attentive to the social field and to be alert to interpersonal and behavorial cues, perceiving relatively more about a speaker than about his message. Field-independent individuals, however, tend to be more impersonal within a social context and to concentrate on the content of the message rather than the person delivering it. Finally, in tests

involving reading, verbal ability and verbal paired-associated learning, field-independent individuals usually outscore field-sensitive ones, and, in such situations, tend to exhibit more competitive behavior (Leppke, 1967; Witkin, 1962, 1974).

All in all, there are remarkable similarities between those characteristics often attributed to the disadvantaged learner and those indicative of field-sensitivity. It may well be that the so-called disadvantaged learner represents a tendency toward field-sensitivity while middle-class children, who do well in the abstract curriculum favored within the schools, owe their success, at least partially, to their ability to use field-independent learning strategies. Although evidence seems to point toward the role of child-rearing patterns in the development of field-dependent or field-independent tendencies in an individual,[5] there may be an hereditary element. At any rate, such tendencies do seem to be relatively stable. Although school experience, according to Witkin (1962: 368-389), leads to a general lessening of field-dependency in a group as a whole, each individual tends to retain his intra-group position on a field-dependent/independent continuum. Further, Witkin (1974) states that learning ability and memory capacity are affected by an individual's field orientation only insofar as different tasks are better suited to one learning style than to another. In this connection, it is interesting to note that two other groups of children who commonly experience difficulty in school learning, namely the creative child and the child who is characterized as suffering a learning disability, also seem to display a tendency toward a field-sensitive cognitive mode (Guyer and Friedman, 1975). It is tempting to speculate to what extent the main difference between the creative child, the learning disabled child and the disadvantaged child may be that of the label given each.

The field-sensitive/field-independent distinction may not explain everything, but it does lend itself to the formulation of a theoretical model of disadvantage and school failure that subsumes both genetic and environmental causes, while at the same time it opens the door to future research and a more systematic pedagogical application of such research findings.

Working from this model, it can be surmised that, in the foreign language classroom, the abstract and mechanistic methods often employed will tend to be counterproductive when applied to the field-sensitive student. Witkin (1974) points out that field-sensitive individuals are likely to accept whatever organization of materials is presented to them as final, and to treat the material as a global memory task, whereas field-independent students are inclined to re-structure material in order to optimize learning. Therefore, the teacher would be able to facilitate the learning among the field-sensitive by imposing an obvious structure on the material to be learned and by encouraging the students to be consciously aware of that structure. In presenting syntactic structure, the teacher would probably be wise to use both deductive and inductive strategies and to attempt to recast the material in as logical and comprehensive a manner as possible.

The same type of difficulty is likely to occur when the field-sensitive student is asked to learn vocabulary, particularly when that vocabulary consists of a paired list of English and French terms. There will be a tendency to attempt to memorize discrete fragments of language rather than to integrate the words into a regular system of meaning or to apply mediational strategies. Such strategies or "gimmicks" can be pointed out to the students, as can lexical family relationships and cognate relationships.

The preference for a global and undifferentiated cognitive style among the field-sensitive would seem to account for the common observation (Avery, 1970; Chastain and Woerdehoff, 1968) that lower aptitude students, as measured by instruments such as the Modern Language Aptitude Test, do better with audio-lingual than with cognitive-code types of material. Since the audio-lingual method stresses habit formation through the memorization of dialogues and sentence patterns, it would be logical to assume that field-sensitive individuals, who already tend to overemphasize the memory component in learning, would have an advantage. On the other hand, the audio-lingual method assumes that the student will go beyond memorization to an inductive discovery of rules. At this point, the field-sensitive individual is at a distinct disadvantage since he typically has little skill in abstracting a part from its whole and then re-structuring the existing material to include the new. Thus, assuming an absence of other intervening variables, one would expect the field-sensitive student to outperform the field-independent one in a strictly audio-lingual program, at least at the beginning, but later to fall rapidly behind as his memory becomes inadequate in relationship to the vast amount of material to be mastered, and the importance of being able to reorganize material according to rules becomes progressively more evident.

Another implication of the field-independent/field-sensitive distinction involves the time allowed for learning. Since the field-dependent student is more likely to depend upon memory than upon the recognition of rule relationships in mastering material, he is also likely to need more time. Unfortunately, time is what most foreign language programs limit, and when, as is often the case with lower-class and ethnic-linguistic minority group children, they also lack the academic background of their classmates, failure seems almost certain. Obviously, the factors of insufficient time and background can be obviated. More time can be allowed, either through flexible pacing or by a reduction in the amount of material to be assimilated, and the learning deficit can be handled through review and with techniques designed to foster mastery learning.

Field-sensitive students seem to depend upon context in their dealings with the world. Their preferred sensory mode is often visual rather than aural or oral, and they benefit from the use of films, slides, posters, and other visual learning reinforcers. In helping these students to succeed in foreign language learning, the teacher can use felt board techniques, gestures and mime to teach dialogues. The use of actual objects can be encouraged as well as activities which cause the student to act out what is being said or studied. Pictures can be drawn or pasted on language

master cards and used to give the student an opportunity to connect a visual image with the word or sentence to be understood, and finally, structure can be visualized through the use of words written on index cards and then manipulated to demonstrate the visual reality of grammatical transformations.

The creation of a humanistic and supportive atmosphere within the classroom is also important. Field-sensitive children feel more at ease when they can depend upon the social surroundings for cues and when the material they are dealing with focuses upon people rather than facts. The use of the foreign language should be as much as possible for genuine communication, and sentences used to illustrate syntactical patterns and for testing should contain "human interest" whenever possible. Further, since situations involving competition tend to result in anxiety and withdrawal among field-sensitive students rather than in increased effort, the competitive model should be de-emphasized and a co-operative one endorsed. Evaluative techniques which judge the student largely in comparison with his own previous performance rather than in light of the achievement of other students are also helpful.

There is some evidence that school facilities and curriculum are relatively unimportant in determining school achievement when compared with the ability of the teacher to sustain positive interpersonal relationships with his students. Ramírez and Castañeda (1974: 129-151) believe that this relationship is frequently determined by the relative degree of field-sensitivity or field-independence of the teacher in relation to that of his students. Witkin (1974) verifies the fact that, in this case, likes do attract, and that a highly field-independent teacher may have difficulty interacting with a highly field-sensitive student, or vice versa. The question remains, however, as to the effectiveness of training in modifying cognitive style, and although Ramírez and Castañeda are optimistic and advocate bicognitive development for both student and teacher, the stability factor found in Witkin's studies (1962: 368-389) casts some doubt on the effectiveness of such training.

But there is hope. Deficiency may be very little more than difference, and difference can be dealt with. Foreign language teachers can stop mourning lowered standards and concentrate on different ones instead. Maybe Johnny cannot learn French in the same manner as Mary can learn Spanish, but he <u>can</u> learn, and we are beginning to acquire some concrete ways to help him.

Notes

[1]Although the term "disadvantaged" is in current disrepute, it nevertheless continues to be used and understood by the general public. It should, however, be understood in historical perspective--that is, as one in a long series of terms including deficient, deprived, disadvantaged, and the currently preferred term--different, which have been used by social scientists to refer to those people in American society whose access to education, power and wealth is less than is that of middle- and upper-class individuals.

[2]For an account of how the "system" can subvert the principles and ideals of new teachers, see Estelle Fuchs, "How Teachers Learn to Help Children Fail" in Keddie, 1973: 75-85.

[3]There is much evidence of damage done to lower-class children by a physically deficient environment. Roger Lewin (1975), for example, claims that there is an interrelationship between poor early nutrition and later poor language development. According to his data, moderate nutritional inadequacy can produce neurobiological deficiencies that are irreversible.

See also, Perspective on Human Deprivation (U.S. Dept. of Health, Education and Welfare, 1968).

[4]For a systematic analysis of behavioral science models in theories of education for the disadvantaged, see David E. Washburn, Democracy and the Education of the Disadvantaged: A Pragmatic Inquiry, (1971).

[5]Witkin (1962) emphasizes the role of the mother in the child's early development, and his data appear to isolate many of the same characteristics as do Bernstein's (1972) and Turner's (1973).

See also Modiano (1969) and Ramírez and Castañeda (1974: Chapter 5).

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